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Socio-Genesis of Leisure Travel: Insights from the Russian Society (1955–Present)

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Title: Socio-Genesis of Leisure Travel: Insights from the Russian Society (1955–Present)

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Abstract:

Tourism researchers have advanced our understanding of tourists and their behaviors. Most existing studies are driven by deterministic models of human behavior (MacCannell, 2001), and thus fail to identify deeper underlying factors that structure and inform the social reality for tourists (Dann & Cohen, 1991). The questions as to why and how individuals have come to form certain preferences, beliefs, and behavior patterns has been largely left at the periphery of tourism scholarship. The current study is partly to counter this research trend and to account for the emic understanding of social reality. This research also follows MacCannell's (1976) proposition to view a touristic experience as a way to understand society, as travel is its essential constituent. Thus, we aim to understand how people interpret the act of leisure travel and why these meanings may change during one's life, all with respect to society-level processes.

Conceptually and methodologically, the study is underpinned by Elias' figurational, or process, sociology. Elias (1978) contends that societies consist of figurations, or historically produced and reproduced "structures of mutually oriented and dependent people," connected by various political, economic, and emotional bonds (p. 261). Elias' sociology is concerned with dynamic patterns of meaning making, as manifested during the periods of epistemological disruptions when figurations are likely to transform themselves. The study is situated in the context of Russia, which is a suitable setting to study the dynamics of figurations, given the nation's history of epistemological disruptions resulting from a tumultuous political and economic past.

Underpinned by constructivism, the process-oriented methodology implies three steps: (1) to reconstruct the macro-level, (2) to reconstruct the micro-level, or individuals' constructions and perceptions of the figurations, and (3) to reconstruct the socio-genesis of the figuration. For (1), we identified significant historical events from 1955 to the present that are likely to be remembered by the members of figurations, or average Russian citizens. For (2), we resorted to retrospective longitudinal interviews with 27 Russian individuals, born 1955–1975 and currently residing in Samara, Russia (Huber, Milne, & Hyde, 2016). Our findings constitute (3). During the Soviet period, individuals are members of formal (the state, Communist Party) and informal figurations (workplace). Successful enactment of membership within formal figurations is rewarded with travel opportunities to enhance members' morality and collectivism. These are reflected in travel themes such as *Exploring the Difference* and *Being a Good Soviet Citizen*. Leisure enacted outside of formal figurations functions to fulfil citizens' practical needs arising from a certain economic and political context, as in *Learning about Contrasts* and *Acquiring Deficit Goods*. With the crash of many known figurations, during Perestroika, tourism has become a commodity to be purchased like any other. Having previously benefited from more or less equal distribution of social tourism, individuals view the new social order as unfair and *Unaffordability of Leisure* travel as discriminating. Cultural habitus has struggled to keep pace with value changes in modern Russia. The older cohort of our participants (born 1955–1969) tends to interpret travel as well deserved *Rest* and as *Opportunity to Connect with Past*, while those born 1970–1975 interpret leisure travel in a more conventional way, as *Exploring Foreign*

Lands. We further elaborate on the meaning of these findings for tourism.

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